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When legions thunder past: The Second World War and India's north-eastern frontier

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In 2013, the National Army Museum asked its audiences to select Britain's greatest battle. The battle that won the poll was neither Waterloo nor D-Day, but Imphal and Kohima in 1944.¹ Though still a surprise for some, the result betrayed the resurgence of the China-Burma-India Theatre (CBI) in collective memories of the Second World War. The twin sieges arguably have many of the ingredients for a popular myth. When Japanese forces crossed into India in March 1944, their goal was nothing less than to reverse the tide of the war in CBI, then turning in the Allies' favour. Imphal, the capital of the princely state of Manipur, had the biggest concentration of Allied troops and supply bases in north-eastern India; Kohima, in Assam's Naga Hills District, lay on the route for reinforcements. By taking the two towns, Japan hoped to prevent an Allied invasion of Burma and stop air supplies to Nationalist China. For three long months, the Allies fought tooth and nail and sometimes against the odds to repel the Japanese and the Indian National Army (INA). Fought in rugged, forested terrain and in the midst of the monsoon, Imphal and Kohima saw some of the fiercest hand-to-hand fighting in the Second World War. Thousands of Allied soldiers had been killed by the end of it. Yet more Japanese were dead still, and the victory was on the Allies' side. Japan had lost a key opportunity to recover the initiative in CBI. More than that, its victorious foray into India turned into a full retreat: the Allies went on the offensive to retake Southeast Asia.

To CBI veterans, long convinced of being a "forgotten army", Imphal and Kohima's newfound popularity has the taste of a vindication. The recent spate of military histories and memoirs on the two sieges and the Burma Campaign has probably contributed to the phenomenon. But the tale they tell is one of tactical twists and turns, and its main preoccupation lies with soldiers' experiences.² What is still largely forgotten is how the Second World War affected the societies caught in the midst of CBI—the people of Assam, and especially of the neighbouring Patkai mountains. Almost uniquely in British India, the Patkai's inhabitants directly lived through Japanese invasion;³ yet we only have, to date, fragmentary if important information on their experiences.⁴ This article uses largely untapped government archives in India and Britain,

¹ Angus MacSwan, 'Victory over Japanese at Kohima named Britain's greatest battle', *Reuters*, 21 April 2013.

² For instance: D. D. Rooney, *Burma victory: Imphal and Kohima March 1944 to May 1945*, 2nd edn (London: Cassell, 2000); Robert Lyman and Peter Dennis, *Kohima 1944: The battle that saved India* (Oxford: Osprey, 2010); Mike Lowry, *Fighting through to Kohima: A memoir of war in India and Burma* (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2003); Fergal Keane, *Road of bones: The siege of Kohima 1944* (London: Harper, 2010); John Colvin, *Not ordinary men: The story of the battle of Kohima*, 3rd edn (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2012); Louis Allen, *Burma: The longest war 1941-45* (London: Dent, 1984); Jon Latimer, *Burma: The forgotten war* (London: John Murray, 2004).

³ B. B. Lall, *A regime of fears and tears: History of the Japanese occupation of the Andaman Islands*, 2nd edn (Delhi: Farsight, 2000).

⁴ Jangkhomang Guite, 'Representing local participation in INA–Japanese Imphal campaign: The case of the Kukis in Manipur, 1943–45', *Indian Historical Review*, 37:2 (2010), 291–309; Pum Khan Pau,

contemporary press reports, as well private memoirs and diaries in order to sketch out the political, cultural and socio-economic transformations the Second World War caused across the Patkai.

The marginalisation of the conflict's local dimension is all the more problematic, this article argues, because it is difficult to understand the Patkai's historical trajectory in the last seven decades without reference to it. The India-Burma borderlands' sudden metamorphosis into a key frontline in a global conflict between 1942 and 1945 was a true upheaval for the Kuki, Meitei, Naga, Mizo or Kachin inhabitants of the region. War entailed an incredible number of changes, not always new but unprecedented in their concatenation over three short years. What was even more important was the nature of this sea-change. The war exerted powerful push-and-pull effects—that is, complex and conflicting pressures—on the geo-body, political economy, and human landscape of the Patkai. Charles Tilly's adage that “war made the state, and the state made war” holds true here: the Second World War caused an unprecedented penetration of the colonial state into the region, hitherto secluded and left to indirect rule.⁵ What war did not make, however, was the Indian nation—indeed, it rendered it even more difficult. For rather than integrating the Patkai into national space alongside state penetration, the conflict acted as an agent of ethnicisation and of *transnationalisation*—revivifying and expanding the region's ties to the wider world beyond India. And yet, two years later, the Patkai was forcibly partitioned upon Burma and India's independence from colonial rule. The close temporal succession of the conflict and the transfer of power would make the making of post-colonial nations that much more challenging and divisive in the India-Southeast Asia borderlands.

On the edge of war

CBI veterans remember the Patkai as a maze of abrupt ridges and deep valleys covered in impenetrable jungle, without modern infrastructure, and where exceptional rainfall fosters ideal conditions for malaria, leeches, disease and despair—a place so unforgiving as to feel like hell on earth.⁶ In fact, the region had historically been a human, economic and cultural crossroads between the Indian sub-continent, the Southeast Asian peninsula, and Inner Asia. If the Patkai appeared remote and forgotten, it was because of its encounter with colonialism. British rule had created arbitrary divisions between Burma and India and undermined the transregional ties and cross-cultural interaction that characterized the Patkai's human landscape. It had also artificially secluded the hills from the plains—and purposely kept the highlands beyond the pale of direct state presence.

A brief sketch of the Patkai's history until the eve of the war will underscore just how disruptive the colonial experience was for local societies and their ties to the rest of the world. Despite its elevation (up to 3,826 meters), the range had been crossed by ancient trade routes linking

'Tedim road—The strategic road on a frontier: A historical analysis', *Strategic Analysis*, 36:5 (2012), 776-786; Pum Khan Pau, 'Situating local events in geo-political struggles between the British and Japanese empires: The politics of Zo participation during the Second World War', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 42:4 (2014), 667-692.

⁵ Charles Tilly, 'Reflections on the history of European state-making', in *The formation of national states in Western Europe*, ed. by C. Tilly (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p.42.

⁶ Slim, the British commander on the Burma front, described it as “some of the world's worst country, breeding the world's worst diseases, and having for half the year at least the world's worst climate”. William J. Slim, *Defeat into victory: Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942-1945* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000 (1956)), p. 172.

Bengal and Assam to Tibet, Burma and China.⁷ Interconnected networks of religious patronage, marriage alliances, and labour systems linked the Patkai and surrounding areas, networks in turn connected to multiple migratory flows.⁸ Labour shortages and fertile lowlands generated regular movement and socio-cultural interaction between the Patkai and the lowlands, economically interdependent.⁹

The region was therefore marked by abundant cultural, linguistic and religious diversity and fluidity. The Imphal Valley hosted the kingdom of Manipur, whose Meitei inhabitants spoke a Tibeto-Burman language and practised Hinduism. Naga groups holding a variety of indigenous beliefs lived in the central Patkai. Related people lived further to the north—such as the Noctes, influenced by Assamese Vaishnavism. Kachin groups inhabited the foothills east and west of the northern Patkai. In the south lived various “Zo” groups—Chins, Paites, Kukis, Mizos. Many of these groups were still on the move when colonial rule first arrived in north-eastern India.¹⁰ From one angle they arguably formed an ethno-geographic space in its own right, Zomia, rather than being part of the more familiar geographic constructions of South, Southeast, or Inner Asia.¹¹

Yet, in the century preceding the war, the gradual consolidation of British rule in neighbouring Assam and Burma had fractured the Patkai. Assam’s transformation into a frontier of global capitalism had dispossessed and territorialised the Patkai’s inhabitants, and eventually secluded them within the highlands. Initially keen to develop trade routes with China via the Patkai and the Himalayas, colonial authorities in Assam had abandoned their projects, deeming the difficulties of terrain and war-related devastation too great.¹² Instead, they turned the neighbouring Brahmaputra and Surma Valleys into a land of tea plantations, coal fields, and rubber and timber extraction. The foot of the hills became prime land for these commercial enterprises, and tea planters and forestry departments appropriated the land with the help of colonial property regimes. Stripped of their shifting cultivation fields and hunting or fishing grounds in the plains, prevented from accessing trade centres, the Nagas or the Kukis were increasingly circumscribed to the highlands.¹³

The Patkai’s isolation intensified with British conquests and colonial efforts to enforce a legal and territorial compartmentalization between hills and plains. Highland inhabitants had responded to colonial and capitalist constraints on their lives by attacking tea gardens or plains settlements, and sometimes through full-scale uprisings.¹⁴ British authorities framed these incidents as the result of an age-old opposition between hills and plains: one the land of savagery, primitiveness, and statelessness, the other the realm of civilisation, order, and modernity. Recast as lawless “tribes” always ready for predatory “raids”, the Kachins, the Kukis, or the Nagas became a threat to the Empire’s good subjects in the Assam plain, and to

⁷ Gunnel Cederlöf, *Founding an empire on India's north-eastern frontiers, 1790-1840: Climate, commerce, polity* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 82-86.

⁸ Indrani Chatterjee, *Forgotten friends: Monks, marriages, and memories of Northeast India* (New Delhi; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁹ Jangkhomang Guite, 'Colonialism and its unruly? The colonial state and Kuki raids in nineteenth century Northeast India', *Modern Asian Studies*, 48:5 (2013), 1188-1232, (pp. 1191-93).

¹⁰ Joy L. K. Pachau, *Being Mizo: Identity and belonging in Northeast India* (Oxford: OUP, 2014), pp. 100-101; Pum Khan Pau, 'Administrative rivalries on a frontier: Problem of the Chin-Lushai Hills', *Indian Historical Review*, 34:1 (2007), 187-209, (p. 189).

¹¹ Willem van Schendel, 'Geographies of knowing, geographies of ignorance: Jumping scale in Southeast Asia', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 20: (2002), 647-668.

¹² Cederlöf, *Founding an empire*. (Chapter 4).

¹³ e.g. Guite, 'Colonialism and its unruly?'.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*; Mandy Sadan, *Being and becoming Kachin: Histories beyond the state in the borderworlds of Burma* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). (Chapter 1).

its allied economic interests.¹⁵ Eventually, British authorities “pacified” the Patkai through brutal military campaigns. Piecemeal annexation followed over the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, without regard for ethnic divisions or trans-local links. Instead, the Patkai’s partition largely hinged on the provenance of colonial military expeditions—whether Assam, Bengal, or Burma, the administrative entity responsible for the conquest of a given area assumed jurisdiction over it. A few territorial adjustments were later made, always based on perceived administrative convenience. The Patkai’s people found themselves secluded and divided between entities that would later claim to be nation-states.¹⁶

What’s more, colonial constructions of the Nagas or the Kukis as fundamentally alien and beyond the pale of modernity came to underpin the entire logic of British rule in the region: the region was insulated from the outside world and from direct state control. From 1873 onwards, an Inner Line prohibited British subjects from entering the hills without a government permit, and Patkai inhabitants from crossing into “settled” areas – further cutting off trade, interaction and cultural networks between hills and plains.¹⁷ The Inner Line also became the territorial limit of colonial direct rule: the Patkai was deemed economically uninteresting and too backward for regular administration. In “administered” areas, government-anointed chiefs and headmen were entrusted with collecting house-tax, sourcing labour, and maintaining the peace; a handful of frontier officials in government outposts supervised them, backed by paramilitary Assam Rifles and “interpreters”. A limited number of bridle tracks and mule paths were built to enable governmental movement and symbolise colonial authority. Their construction and maintenance were assured by the inhabitants themselves, concurrently forced to carry supplies.¹⁸ American and European missions enabled the state to remain in the background. In the Naga and Lushai Hills District, they built dispensaries and village schools, spreading the written word in an oral culture and reducing linguistic diversity.¹⁹ As we shall see, this was only one way in which society and culture in the Patkai were durably affected by the colonial encounter, never more so than during the war.

In the early 1940s, the Patkai therefore appeared to belong to Asia’s non-state spaces. The range was beyond the bounds of regular administration and part of the northern Naga areas and southern Lushai Hills remained fully un-administered (directly or not).²⁰ Early twentieth century constitutional reforms had reinforced the divide between hills and plains: when British authorities decided to implement limited power devolution in India and Burma, they decided that trans-Inner Line areas were too backward and too different to be concerned. The Patkai would remain beyond the pale of elected Indian governments. Some scholars have since interpreted the region’s encounter with colonialism as a sign that its inhabitants consciously

¹⁵ Boddhisattva Kar, 'When was the postcolonial? A history of policing impossible lines', in *Beyond counter-insurgency: Breaking the impasse in Northeast India*, ed. by Sanjib Baruah (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp.49-77; Sanjib Baruah, *India against itself: Assam and the politics of nationality* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp. 28-38.

¹⁶ Pau, 'Administrative rivalries on a frontier'.

¹⁷ Chatterjee, *Forgotten friends*. (Chapter 5).

¹⁸ Lipokmar Dzuvichu, 'Roads and the Raj: The politics of road building in colonial Naga Hills, 1860s–1910s', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 50:4 (2013), 473–494; Lipokmar Dzuvichu, 'Empire on their backs: Coolies in the eastern borderlands of the British Raj', *International Review of Social History*, 59:Supplement (2014), 89-112; Joy Pachuau and Willem Van Schendel, *The camera as witness: A social history of Mizoram, northeast India* (Cambridge: CUP, 2015). Chapter 8.

¹⁹ Richard Maxwell Eaton, 'Conversion to Christianity among the Nagas, 1876-1971', *Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 21:1 (1984), 1-44.

²⁰ New Delhi, NAI, External Affairs Proceedings (1947), Extension of regular administration to the Naga Hills Tribal Area, 71-NEF/47; Pachuau and Van Schendel, *The camera as witness*. (Chapter 6).

rejected the state and its entrapments.²¹ Yet, to the extent that a clear distinction between state space and non-state space existed, it was as much the product of British rule. The Kachins, Mizos, and Nagas had been excluded from whatever opportunities the state could have brought by colonial policies and discourses.²² And in the same breath, the colonial encounter had undercut their transregional connections and split them apart, through a border that negated their presence in order to produce a neat divide between India and Burma.

Figure 1. Jakhama, a Naga village in the Patkai

Source: Cambridge Centre of South Asian Studies (CSAS), Pawsey Papers, Box A102, Album 18.

The making of a geo-strategic hotspot

Direct state presence was thus at a minimum when a global war materialised on the Patkai's doorstep in 1942. In March, Japan conquered Burma after sweeping over much of Southeast Asia in the winter. Invasion rumours spread throughout India. In China, the Guomindang government feared that its capacity to fight on was doomed, now that the last land route to the Allies and their supplies had been lost. And yet the Japanese advance was to stop there, in the Patkai—on the edge of India. Over the next few years, the Assam plain and the highlands would turn into the Allies' military bulwark against Tokyo. In the process, the Second World War would cause an unprecedented intensification of direct colonial state control in the Patkai. Administrative expansion would gain momentum in tandem with pervasive militarisation. *De jure* or *de facto* territorial adjustments would take place. Major infrastructural works would remodel the landscape, along with widespread deforestation. Crucially—and there lay the fundamentally paradoxical effect of the war—this newly blatant state presence would not be distinctly Indian. On the contrary, it would facilitate the revivification and reconfiguration of the Assam highlands' local *and transnational* ties.

War and attendant state penetration first reared their head in the Patkai with the humanitarian crisis caused by the arrival of Burma refugees in March 1942. Indians and Europeans had begun fleeing Burma long before Rangoon's evacuation. Initially they travelled by ship and plane, or via the Arakan coast; but when the Japanese advance closed off these escape routes, the Patkai Range became their last hope of reaching India. Scores of men, women, and children with very little to eat or clothe themselves travelled through the Chindwin Valley, climbing up to the border at Tamu before descending into Manipur. Others went further north, crossing the Chaukan Pass to arrive in upper Assam. A few went up the northern route via the Lohit Valley. The monsoon was barely starting, food was scarce, and disease rife.²³

Faced with an emergency—albeit one in which the fate of white refugees mattered far more—Assam and Manipur authorities improvised, backed up by the private sector. Across the border, Delhi's agent in Burma had appointed all able men he could find to try to regulate the exodus.²⁴

²¹ James C. Scott, *The art of not being governed: An anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CO; London: Yale University Press, 2009); Guite, 'Colonialism and its unruly?.'

²² Charles Patterson Giersch, 'Across Zomia with merchants, monks, and musk: process geographies, trade networks, and the Inner-East–Southeast Asian borderlands', *Journal of Global History*, 5:2 (2010), 215–239; Cederlöf, *Founding an empire*, p. 11; Sadan, *Being and becoming Kachin*, p. 73; Jelle J. P. Wouters and Tanka B. Subba, 'The "Indian face," India's Northeast, and "the idea of India"', *Asian Anthropology*, 12:2 (2013), 126–140; Pachuau, *Being Mizo*; Bérénice Guyot-Réard, *Shadow States: India, China and the Himalayas, 1910–1962* (Cambridge: CUP, 2017).

²³ Hugh Tinker, 'A forgotten long march: The Indian exodus from Burma, 1942', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 6:1 (1975), 1–15.

²⁴ Cambridge, CSAS, Tayabji Papers (n.d.), The Burma story.

Assisted by European tea planters, Indian authorities scrambled to provide for the exhausted refugees who managed to reach the border. Plantation workers and government staff improvised a series of stage camps and carried food into the highlands,²⁵ while the Indian Army built a fifty-four mile tarmac road from the border to the foothills over just eight weeks—enabling refugees to travel on to the rail-head at Dimapur, on the edge of Assam.²⁶ This wartime state intervention into the Patkai was the first of many.

Figure 2. The Indian Tea Association at work in the Patkai

Source: CSAS, Pawsey Papers, Box A102, Album 18.

Meanwhile in Burma, the Allied debacle was worsening. Chinese and British Indian troops were retreating even faster than the refugees, forcing Manipur authorities to go into the highlands to warn villagers to hide away their property and food. The Japanese stopped at the foot of the Patkai at the start of the monsoon, but devastating air-raids on Imphal in May 1942 underscored how close they were.²⁷ The defence of the Raj was now of the highest priority, and it was in Assam and its borderlands that it would have to be ensured. Compared to the hasty, mostly in-and-out efforts to manage the refugee exodus, militarisation would cause a far more durable intensification of state penetration in the Patkai.

Over the course of 1942, north-eastern India became a huge military camp. Allied troops poured in to bolster India's eastern defences. 51 British army units and 47 US air squadrons took residence in Assam and Manipur, amounting to 340,000 Indian, 100,000 British, 90,000 West African, 65,000 Chinese, and 10,000 American troops.²⁸ Some Naga villages were now surrounded by military camps, relocating as a result.²⁹ At one stage, the 2,000 square miles of Manipur's Imphal Valley had 200,000 troops for 333,000 inhabitants. The British Residency faced a ceaseless stream of cypher-messages, meetings with Eastern Command officers deep into the night, and army requests for monetary advances.³⁰ Countless private and government buildings were taken over, sometimes without warning. Half of Meitei houses were seized. This was far from enough, so land too was requisitioned to build barracks, hospitals, sanatoriums, water-plants, pipelines, and arsenals. Forests became a hidden casualty of the war, as bamboo, thatch, and timber were cut down for shelter and firewood. Allied troops also needed food, hundreds and thousands of tons of food. Grow More Food campaigns were launched in Assam's fertile valleys and a seed distribution scheme around Imphal. Soon, the Meiteis were selling 20-40,000 lbs of fresh vegetables a day to military depots.³¹

Just as momentous for state-building were the massive investments in transport infrastructure required to defend north-eastern India and retake Burma. The frontline was 900 miles away from its supply base at Calcutta, and there were no roads fit for military use in the Patkai.³² Thousands of workers were brought into the hills to build a rail and road network between Assam, Manipur and Burma in conditions of extreme danger and difficulty. Existing routes

²⁵ Cambridge, CSAS, Whyte Papers (March-May 1942), Diary of the evacuation scheme; Geoffrey Tyson, *Forgotten frontier* (Calcutta: W.H. Targett, 1945).

²⁶ Tinker, 'A forgotten long march', (p. 8).

²⁷ Cambridge, CSAS, Gimson Papers (n.d.), Notes on the war in Manipur, p.4; Cambridge, CSAS, Gimson papers (n.d.), The bombing of Imphal.

²⁸ 'The campaign in Burma' (London: Central Office of Information, 1946).

²⁹ Itanagar, APSA, NEFA Secretariat (1943), Tour diaries of the PO Tirap, EX/225/43. (17 January 1944).

³⁰ CSAS, Gimson Papers, Notes on the war, p.2.

³¹ Cambridge, CSAS, Gimson Papers (n.d.), Wartime economics, p.1.

³² The only notable road in the Lushai Hills at the time was thus fit only for carts. Pachuau and Van Schendel, *The camera as witness*, p. 161.

were expanded, doubled in width, and covered with tarmac—all thanks to people working with very limited tools, and sometimes by hand. Major new arteries were created, starting with the asphalted road from Palel (near Imphal) to Tamu, the fastest and easiest entry point into Burma. This traditional corridor removed “any possibility of surprise”,³³ so army engineers built a 265-km road through eastern Manipur to Tiddim in Burma’s Chin Hills, yet unoccupied by Japan. Completed in May 1943, the road enabled Indian troops to infiltrate the Burma side of the Patkai and confront advancing Japanese troops.³⁴

One artery mattered above all others, however: the road that would recreate a land link between the Allies and besieged China. From December 1942 onwards, thousands of workers and hundreds of engineers worked unceasingly to build a road from Ledo, in upper Assam, to northern Burma and on to Yunnan. Two four-inch pipelines, supplying fuel from the Digboi oil fields in Assam, were built alongside it. Nothing—whether leeches, monsoon, wild tigers, landslides, dysentery nor malaria—was allowed to stand in the way. The resulting human toll was so high the road earned an unhappy nickname: “A man a mile”.³⁵

Figure 3. Building roads and irrigation channels

Source: CSAS, Pawsey Papers, Box A102, Album 18.

Until the Ledo Road could be completed however, Nationalist China still had to be saved from asphyxiation. Moreover, airpower was crucial in the Allies’ struggle against Japan. Airfields were thus as strategic as roads. North-eastern India became the centre-piece of an aerial lifeline to Chiang Kai-shek’s regime. From June 1942 to September 1945, American planes risked the dangers of the aerial route across the Patkai and the eastern Himalayas—the “Hump”—almost every day to airlift 650,000 tons of goods and weapons to Yunnan.³⁶ Assam and Manipur had had very few airfields at the start of the war; by the end of it, the Patkai and Himalayan foothills were peppered with them.

Dramatic in itself, the impact of militarisation on the Patkai should further be grasped in terms of the momentum it generated for administrative expansion in the highlands. Hard pressed to cope with the challenges of Allied presence, colonial authorities noticeably stepped up their presence. The biggest challenge was to intensify government control in administered areas, and to expand it in the un-administered Naga hills and eastern Himalayas. In 1943, an Adviser to the Governor of Assam was especially appointed to spearhead the momentum and hire more frontier staff.³⁷ That same year, a new administrative unit, the Tirap Frontier Tract, brought the areas around the Ledo Road under closer administration.³⁸

It is in this context that the push-and-pull effects of the war—of its state-making *and* transnationalising impact—can first be detected. For, even as the war created an atmosphere of feverish military and administrative expansion, it concurrently and inadvertently blended Assam and Burma’s frontier administrations, making moot the Patkai’s colonial territorialisation. Viewed from the region, the distinction between India and Burma was

³³ Ian Lyall Grant, *Burma: The turning point* (Chichester: Zampi Press, 1993), p. 35.

³⁴ Pau, ‘Tedim road’.

³⁵ Yasmin Khan, *The Raj at war: A people's history of India's Second World War* (London: The Bodley Head, 2015). (Chapter 19).

³⁶ Yikun Ge and Wei Li, ‘Links between Yunnan and India during the Second World War’, in *India and China in the colonial world*, ed. by Madhavi Thampi (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2005), pp.193-198; John Plating, *The Hump: America's strategy for keeping China in World War II* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2011).

³⁷ London, BL, IOR (1937-1947), Burma-Assam border: Extension of the control area in the Naga Hills, IOR/L/PS/12/3116. (Revision of the eastern boundary of the Naga Hills District, 15 July 1942).

³⁸ APSA, EX/225/43.

anyhow rather superficial. Cross-border ties notwithstanding, Burma had been an Indian province until 1937 and its boundary with Assam remained undemarcated, when not undelimited. But the war blurred India and Burma's spheres of influence even further. Pressed by manpower shortages, Indian authorities "borrowed" Burma officials, in ample supply since they had taken refuge in India.³⁹ Assam and Manipur were included in the newly founded South-East Asia Command, and the Indian Standard Time was pushed an hour ahead—a change to the benefit of the region, which lay far to the east of Delhi.⁴⁰ As importantly, the need to provide a lifeline to guerrillas and populations across the border made the Assam Government responsible for preserving a facade of administrative normalcy in what remained of British Burma. A few colonial officials remained there, trying to keep Japanese forces at bay. Despairing of their own Government, now exiled in northwestern India, some looked to Assam for guidance. "Burma [...] is not suitable to administer this District", argued the Chin Hills District Commissioner, angered by the lack of support. His preference was for India to take control.

"They have no standing in India and only make another obstacle to be got over. [...] When communications with Govt broke down I seized finance and control authority throughout the district and I don't intend to give it up now. The situation does not admit of obtaining sanction for this and that. I sanction it and tell Govt about it later. If they don't like it they must get someone else. [...] I agree that we should be attached to Assam."⁴¹

In some regions, this reattachment of the Burma highlands to India had *de facto* taken place. Officials from Assam's Lushai Hills District now assumed the duties of local district officers in northern Arakan—hearing and trying robbery cases, releasing prisoners, and discussing house tax and village boundaries with local chiefs.⁴² In the northern Patkai, the newly appointed Tirap Political Officer was touring neighbouring parts of Burma, and local Kachins and Nagas were coming to his outpost to settle their disputes.⁴³

In short, the war was "forg[ing...] a bloodstained unity" between northeastern India and southeastern Asia—and the Patkai was at the heart of this reconfiguration.⁴⁴ This strategic and administrative wartime entanglement led London to explore a scheme championed by the Governor of Assam, a Crown Colony that would merge Burma and north-eastern India's highlands, creating a new unit under the British Crown's direct sovereignty. Shelved at the insistence of Burma officials in late 1942, the plan was never seriously reconsidered after 1945.⁴⁵ Short-lived though it was, the Crown Colony scheme would nevertheless contribute to fueling political aspirations among the Patkai's people—aspirations that, for some, did not involve belonging to India.

A stream of change

³⁹ New Delhi, NAI, Home Affairs Proceedings (1944), Replacement of the services of E.M.F. Beadon, 40(31)-Police.

⁴⁰ 'An hour will be "lost" to India', *Times of India*, 29 August 1942.

⁴¹ London, BL, (1928-1976), Anthony G. McCall Papers, Mss Eur E361. (Naylor to McCall, 22 July 1942).

⁴² London, BL, (1984), A.I. Bowman 'Border patrol: Memoir of Lushai Hills and North Arakan 1942-43', Mss Eur D1071, pp.98, 106.

⁴³ APSA, EX/225/43. (September-October 1943 and April 1944).

⁴⁴ Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten armies: The fall of British Asia, 1941-1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), p. 34.

⁴⁵ London, BL, Reid Collection (1937-1942), Letters and papers as Governor of Assam, Mss Eur E278/4. (5 January 1942).

The combination of a deeper, more direct colonial state presence with India and Burma's increased administrative entanglement and discussions on a Crown Colony was the first sign of the Second World War's paradoxical impact on the Patkai. The conflict's second major push and pull was societal rather than governmental. Countless changes and tensions (small and big, positive or not) were re-shaping the fabric of local tribal societies. As we shall see, they ranged from extreme labour extraction to monetisation, from urbanisation to demographic change, from marketisation to new tastes, habits and occupations, from cultural change to the spread of education and, last but not least, enhanced political mobilisation. Not all these changes were new, for colonialism had powerfully affected Patkai societies even while the state remained at a distance. What was unprecedented, however, was the concatenation of these myriad changes over the short time span of the war. Moreover, many of them further undercut the existing colonial reification of the Assam highlands as part of India's geo-body—and of neighbouring regions as part of Burma and China.⁴⁶

One of the most immediate societal changes was that labour extraction reached unprecedented levels. This was, in the first place, to mobilise the Patkai's inhabitants against Japan—another reason for administrative expansion. With the help of Allied intelligence services (called Special Operations Executives), frontier officials recruited Kachin, Chin or Naga villagers into "levies", small bands meant to harass the Japanese, wearing them out and preventing large-scale attacks on the frontline. This they did, through a mixture of Western and indigenous warfare. Sharpened (and sometimes poisoned) bamboo spikes, called *panjis*, half-hidden in the ground were used to great effect. Many highlanders also joined the para-military Assam Rifles and the newly formed Assam Regiment. By inflicting regular physical and psychological damage, these guerrilla tactics contributed to keeping Japanese forces at bay.⁴⁷

The Patkai's inhabitants further came to play a variety of non-combatant roles. Some acted as informants, whether casually or as members of the V Force, a corps primarily dedicated to reconnaissance and intelligence gathering whose officers had all been selected for their knowledge of tribal languages and peoples. Others among the Khamtis, Kachins, or Nagas rescued lost strangers, from starving Burma refugees to stranded Ledo Road engineers.⁴⁸ They also proved essential as porters—a crucial function since, road-building notwithstanding, most of the Patkai could only be reached on foot. Some worked in road construction, others monitored vehicular traffic. Some Angami Nagas thus worked for free to hasten the completion of the Ledo Road, while corporations of young Nagas serviced motor vehicles at selected points along the road.⁴⁹

This contribution was not necessarily voluntary, and some inhabitants resisted joining the Allied war effort. They deserted military and auxiliary forces, when they did not choose to join the Japanese or the INA. One man stands out in particular: Zaphu Phizo, an Angami Naga. In 1942, Phizo was in self-imposed exile in Rangoon, having refused to accept British rule. To achieve independence, he decided to cooperate with the Japanese and joined the INA, fighting

⁴⁶ David Vumlallian Zou and M. Satish Kumar, 'Mapping a colonial borderland: Objectifying the geo-body of India's Northeast', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 70:1 (2011), 141-170.

⁴⁷ Ursula Graham Bower, *Naga path* (London: Murray, 1950); Desmond Kelly, *Kelly's Burma Campaign* (Chichester: Zampi, 2003); Vicky Thomas, *The Naga queen: Ursula Graham Bower and her jungle warriors 1939-45* (Stroud: History Press, 2012); Sadan, *Being and becoming Kachin*; Pau, 'The politics of Zo participation'. Some men were sent to serve in other parts of India. Pachuau and Van Schendel, *The camera as witness*, pp. 204-06.

⁴⁸ Cambridge, CSAS, Mackrell Collection (1942), Rescue operations (film), Film 1.

⁴⁹ London, BL, IOR (1944), Assam Local Government's Reports, IOR L/PJ/5/137. (January); Sir Francis Low, 'Burma front visited: I – The long road to Imphal', *Times of India*, 14 March 1944.

alongside them and, eventually, being captured and jailed.⁵⁰ Phizo would eventually lead the Naga struggle for independence against post-colonial India. In the case of the Kukis, a group centred on the Manipur highlands, there is evidence that the majority sentiment favoured the Japanese. The Kukis had revolted *en masse* against conscription during the First World War, and resentment was still high. When they learnt of Japan's conquests, they took it as the realisation of an old prophecy, *Nongpok Thong Hangani*: when Manipur's "Eastern Gate (would) open", they would get an opportunity to end British rule. In late 1943, the son of a 1917 rebellion leader crossed the Chindwin along with dozens of followers to forge an alliance with the Japanese. The meeting was sealed with a feast. For the remainder of the war, Kukis in Allied-controlled territory actively mobilised against the Allies, whose forces they often deserted, and provided sizeable support for the Japanese. Their chiefs canvassed support through village meetings, distributed pamphlets, and sent their men for training in Japanese territory. When the battles for Imphal and Kohima came, many Kukis joined Japan and the INA as combatants, porters, and guides, and many more provided them with food, shelter, and intelligence.⁵¹

In the nearby Lushai Hills District conversely, colonial authorities secured greater support thanks to their reliance on chiefs. Since their arrival in the region, they had remodeled Mizo power hierarchies into a systematic institution of chieftainship, with heightened control over local communities. The number of chiefs had ballooned from two dozen in the late nineteenth century to some 350 in the 1940s, providing frontier officials with intermediaries in almost each village.⁵² When news of Japan's advance reached the Lushai Hills, the District Superintendent, Tony McCall, called all the chiefs to Aizawl, presenting it as threat to the Lushai Hills motherland against which everyone—frontier administration, chiefs and commoners—should unite. On 3 April 1942, 300 chiefs pledged their allegiance and their will to fight around the Union Jack. McCall's next step was to have the chiefs spread a manifesto calling each Mizo and Paite village to join a Total Defence Scheme against the Japanese. People prepared food and weapon stockpiles and jungle hideouts, learnt to survive air raids and black outs, undertook construction and infrastructural works, or joined labour and fighting corps at home and all across India. Plans were made to evacuate the villages and obstruct the district's paths with boulders should the Japanese intrude, and men were organised into gunmen (*pasalthas*) ready to defend their villages and harass the Japanese. Villages fortified themselves, some taking the appearance of "an enormous hedgehog". (Many preferred to join the Labour Corps however, because it paid more). Military authorities found it too heterodox for their liking, so McCall was soon removed from office; but the Total Defence Scheme helped to deter further Japanese advance into the Patkai and the Lushai Hills became the most comprehensively mobilised part of the region.⁵³ Never before had manpower extraction been so great in the Patkai.

The Second World War simultaneously ushered an *influx* of manpower into the Patkai—and it did not just come from the subcontinent but from all four corners of the globe. With Assam on the frontline, countless nationalities could now be found beyond the Inner Line, communicating

⁵⁰ Marcus Franke, *War and nationalism in South Asia: The Indian state and the Nagas* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 90.

⁵¹ Guite, 'Representing local participation in INA–Japanese Imphal campaign', (pp. 291-99).

⁵² London, BL, McCall Papers (30 April 1944), Report of H.P. Sailo, Agricultural Instructor, Lushai Hills, MSS Eur E361/31.

⁵³ London, BL, (1984), 'Border patrol: Memoir of Lushai Hills and North Arakan 1942-43' (by A.I. Bowman), MSS Eur D1071, 52, 65. See also Cambridge, Centre of South Asian Studies, McCall Papers (n.d.), Account of the Total Defence Scheme; Cambridge, CSAS, (1938-1954), McCall Papers. Anthony G. McCall, *Lushai Chrysalis* (London: Luzac, 1949), pp. 312-20.

with one another through “a sort of contrived Esperanto”.⁵⁴ Traversed by the Ledo Road, the new Tirap Frontier Tract turned into “the most glorious ‘hotch-potch’ imaginable”: workers brought into the hills to work on military projects (many of them Adivasis from Assam’s tea plantations); Chinese soldiers under American command; Gurkhas, Sikhs or Punjabis from the Indian Army; Nepali graziers and tribals from Assam’s “settled” districts; and Kachin refugees from Burma’s Hukawng Valley.⁵⁵ The Ledo Road was being built by people from all over India yet it simultaneously looked “provincially American [...], with small specialised communities representing the same hometown or the same area”.⁵⁶ The colonial compartmentalisation between the Patkai and the rest of the world all but collapsed.

In the process, the Patkai and the Himalayas’ capacity to act as a nodal point between different parts of Asia was restored. The wartime porosity of borders encouraged human and economic flows across India’s borderlands with Tibet, China and Burma, which intensified and expanded.⁵⁷ Chinese, Tibetan or Marwari merchants quickly grasped the benefit of an expanded transport network and heightened wartime requirements. The presence of army depots created further profit opportunities. Licit or not, trade was on the rise between Assam, northern Burma and the Sino-Tibetan marches. Shops were appearing beyond the Inner Line without the administration’s knowledge, and the circulation of opium accelerated.⁵⁸ Tibetan silver coins and paper notes (some of them forged, reportedly) were being siphoned out of Tibet, causing important coin shortages in parts of the plateau. Quantity of Chinese notes could likewise be found for sale in Assam despite the Guomindang’s prohibition on their export, while the rupee travelled in the reverse direction to be found in abundance in parts of Tibet—like connected spatial vessels.⁵⁹

Money was not just circulating through the hills but making deeper inroads there. Monetisation predated the war: colonial authorities had instituted house-tax in “administered” areas, encouraged small shops near outposts and the Inner Line, and paid coolie loads in cash.⁶⁰ In a particularly intense example of a trend affecting much of India, the wartime state’s increased intrusion in society went hand in hand with the acceleration of monetary penetration.⁶¹ An unprecedented number of tribals enrolled into wage labour in the Patkai, initially under compulsion. But as manpower shortages led levies, military projects, and tea gardens to compete for workers, salaries rose. The Nagas’ earning power rose from four or five annas a day before the war to five rupees.⁶² Roadwork became lucrative, and even preferable to cultivation. Many people shed their reluctance to join the Assam Rifles, even after the war, leading to a long-term increase in the non-Gurkha elements of the force.⁶³ And where paying

⁵⁴ Frank Moraes, *Witness to an era: India 1920 to the present day* (Delhi: Vikas, 1973), p. 118.

⁵⁵ APSA, EX/225/43. (14-15 September 1943, 17 January 1944).

⁵⁶ Charles A. Grumich, 'Trucks now move on Ledo Road: Japs being "bulldozed" by American engineers in Burma', *The Washington Post*, 19 March 1944.

⁵⁷ Ge and Li, 'Links between Yunnan and India'.

⁵⁸ APSA, EX/225/43. (15 September); Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten armies*, p. 33.

⁵⁹ New Delhi, NAI, External Affairs Proceedings (1946), Tibetan intelligence reports, 162-CA/46. (21 January report); London, BL, IOR (1944), Tour notes of the Adviser to the Governor of Assam for Tribal Areas and States, 1944-1946 -- 1944 Tour notes, IOR/L/PS/12/3120. (Tour notes for 1946 on the Lohit Valley Sub-Agency).

⁶⁰ Dzuvichu, 'Empire on their backs'; Pachuau and Van Schendel, *The camera as witness*. (Chapter 8).

⁶¹ Indivar Kamtekar, 'The shiver of 1942', *Studies in History* 18:81 (2002), 81-102, (pp. 90-92).

⁶² London, BL, IOR (1943), Assam Local Government’s Reports, IOR L/PJ/5/136. (June); CSAS, Gimson Papers, Wartime economics, p.1.

⁶³ Robert Reid, 'The Assam Rifles in Peace and War', *Blackwood’s Magazine* May 1947, (p. 415).

the house-tax had burdened many households in the administered Patkai, villagers could now earn many times its value.⁶⁴

Wartime shortages meant that locals often struggled to use their hard-earned cash. From oil, sugar, and cloth to paper, medicines or whisky, myriad things were in very short supply.⁶⁵ Given their frontline location, the Imphal Valley and the Patkai were particularly affected: land requisitions and the influx of troops, construction workers and supply organisations put extreme pressure on local communities' food production capacity. Roads and barracks encroached on precious cultivation grounds, while bombs and ambushes often scared villagers away from their fields. Roadworks and military projects were pushing people away from agriculture, whether by force or due to the enticements of high wages: in the Manipur highlands, the agricultural output further dropped.⁶⁶ The situation was at its worst in the hills, where arable land was scarce and traditional shifting cultivation not suited to high population densities. Nor could supplies be easily brought in to fulfil people's needs: Assam's transport network choked under the weight of military requirements, making the supply situation extremely tense in areas far removed from the rail-head, like the Lushai Hills. Galloping inflation ensued. A bag of rice once sold for one and a half rupees now cost forty or even sixty rupees—the authorities bought foodstuff at such a price that the only way to compete was to pay even more.⁶⁷ The entire food sufficiency of highland societies was in danger.

Nascent urbanisation contributed to the situation. No towns had existed in the Patkai before 1942. Dimapur, the gateway to the Naga Hills and to Manipur, had only been a small outpost in a “deadly piece of jungle”. Now however, it had morphed into a boom-town, courtesy of its “first-class base”, airport and rail terminus.⁶⁸ In the Burma Patkai, Kalewa, another trade outpost, became “a mass of *basha* [improvised] homes and shops, and during the rainy season [...] a veritable sea of mud” as the war progressed. Cosmopolitan, these towns also contributed to an altered ethnic make-up in the Patkai. Some of their residents decided to stay after the war, like Gurkha servicemen, ensuring that ethnic transformations would outlast the conflict.⁶⁹

Visible in this demographic change and growing long-distance trade, the wartime cosmopolitanisation of the Patkai was also evident in the variety of novel goods and habits making their way into the hills as a result of Allied army's presence. Cigarettes, matches, tinned beef, thermos flasks, mirrors, mugs, plates, or bicycles—to cite but a few products—could now be bought in the Patkai and the Imphal Valley.⁷⁰ The Meiteis, traditional consumers of jaggery, took a liking to refined white sugar. They soon began to sell their own sugarcane to the Army at profitable rates, buying sugar with the proceeds.⁷¹ In the Naga Hills Districts, the infrastructure of villages was evolving, likely under the influence of wartime constructions and materials. By the end of the war, expensive but durable corrugated steel was replacing thatch roofs on Naga houses, and some communities were planning their electrification. People installed pipes and tanks to supply water directly to their villages, whose hilltop situation had historically meant a long trek to the river down below. “It is an odd commentary on the war

⁶⁴ BL, IOR L/PJ/5/137. (January).

⁶⁵ Khan, *The Raj at war*. (Chapter 15).

⁶⁶ BL, IOR L/PJ/5/136. (March 1943).

⁶⁷ CSAS, Gimson Papers, Wartime economics, p.1; BL, MSS Eur D1071, p.105.

⁶⁸ BL, IOR L/PJ/5/136. (June)

⁶⁹ London, BL, (1947-1948), J.D. Willis, 'Walking trip through the Chin Hills of Burma into the Lushai Hills', MSS Eur C912, pp.13-14, 183-84.

⁷⁰ London, BL, IOR (1945), Report on the measures of rehabilitation and reconstruction undertaken by the GOI in the Naga Hills and Manipur State in 1944-45 to repair the ravages caused by the Japanese Invasion of 1944, Mss Eur E325/19. “Relief”.

⁷¹ CSAS, Gimson Papers, Wartime economics, p.1.

these remote villages should now better be equipped than most villages in the plains”, mused a British official.⁷²

Figure 4. The new face of Naga villages

Source: CSAS, Pawsey Papers, Box A102, Album 18.

New tastes, new consumption patterns, new living choices were spreading, and these evolving habits hinted at other socio-economic changes. Marketisation and labour specialisation were on the rise, along with educational levels. Largely self-sufficient before the war, the Meiteis had got accustomed to growing a surplus and marketing it to meet the army’s gargantuan demands. A budding mercantile community had emerged among them, competing with long-established Marwari merchants. The Mizos, already familiar with cash-cropping, launched their first cooperatives with the help of the Superintendent’s wife.⁷³ And if the majority of the Singphos or the Nagas remained cultivators, a growing number were acquiring new skills and occupations—there were now Mizo nurses in military hospitals, Naga mechanics and contractors, and Chin lorry-drivers.⁷⁴ Others joined the colonial administration, chronically short in manpower, especially now with its European officers away on intelligence missions. In their search for educated people, frontier officials recruited school-going Naga boys and released literate prisoners. As this could not compensate for the many schools requisitioned by the Army, which left many school-going children idle, education became a key preoccupation for hill officials.⁷⁵ Many tribals agreed—indeed, the Mizo chiefs had explicitly demanded a high school before pledging their allegiance to the Allies.⁷⁶ But not everyone sought government intervention. Primary schools were appearing beyond the Inner Line without permission and the number of educated tribals was rising extensively, as people clamoured for more school facilities.⁷⁷ Enriched by his activities as a war contractor, an Angami Naga opened a school in his home village of Viswema in July 1945, to the cheers of a large crowd who had also raised Rs100,000 to constitute a welfare fund.⁷⁸

This growing desire for education was part and parcel of cultural and religious change. There was for instance the growing popularity in the Lushai hills of things as disparate as the scout movement, jeeps, or banjos and ukuleles—the latter merely the newest musical innovation, since pre-war Christianisation had already brought in new instruments and musical sensitivities.⁷⁹ These charming examples betrayed more general changes. Already before the war, many people in the region were reconfiguring themselves as part of territorialised, homogeneous groups. Various communities in the central hills had begun to identify as Nagas, while distinctions between the Mizos, Paites, Chins and Kukis had become salient. If Christianity had spread through the Lushai Hills, it was because people saw it as a fruitful way to represent their evolving concerns—starting with its capacity to symbolise a distinct Mizo

⁷² London, BL, Archer Papers (December 1946–February 1947), Tour diary – Additional Deputy Commissioner, Mokokchung, MSS Eur F236/74. (8 January).

⁷³ Delhi, NAI, Political Department Proceedings (1945), Refusal to evacuees to re-enter the Manipur State and cancellations of pattas of former holders of land in the British Reserve of Manipur, 13(14)-IB/45; Pachuau and Van Schendel, *The camera as witness*. (Chapter 8).

⁷⁴ London, BL, Reid Papers (1946), Assam and the North East Frontier of India, MSS Eur E278/19. “The wars”; CSAS, Gimson Papers, Wartime economics, p.4; BL, MSS Eur C912, p.19.

⁷⁵ BL, IOR L/PJ/5/137. (April); New Delhi, NAI, Political Department Proceedings (1946), Administration report of the Manipur State for the year 1944-45, 13(11)-P/46.

⁷⁶ CSAS, McCall Papers, Account of the Total Defence Scheme. f29.

⁷⁷ APSA, EX/225/43. (15 September 1943); London, BL, (c1974), ‘The rough and the smooth’ (Memoir by G.P. Stewart), MSS Eur C400, p. 182.

⁷⁸ London, BL, IOR (1945), Assam Local Government’s Reports, IOR/L/PJ/5/138. (July).

⁷⁹ Pachuau and Van Schendel, *The camera as witness*, pp. 37-42, 161, 208.

identity.⁸⁰ The war only intensified the coalescence of bounded identities, constructed against each other and particularly against plainsmen, whether Indian or Burmese. Ethnically defined armed levies were one factor in the process.⁸¹ So was Christianity in the Naga areas. It was during the conflict that conversions really acquired momentum: the proportion of Christians jumped from 18% to 46% between 1941 and 1951. Cash contributions to the Bible Society and requests for Angami-language New Testaments multiplied.⁸² Pan-Naga identity was rapidly consolidating and reaching new people.

After the storm

In short, any preconception that the state expansion ushered in by the Second World War also entailed the Indianisation of the Patkai runs against the conflict's transnationalising impact. The Inner Line had broken down, but it had broken down to give way to cosmopolitanism and—therein lay another ambivalence—to ethnicisation. The last stages of the war would only intensify the war's push-and-pull on the Patkai. Not only would the incredible devastation caused by the battles of Imphal and Kohima cause another push of the state into the hills, this time in the guise of reconstruction, but the gradual disappearance of the frontline after the Japanese invasion would generate yet more upheavals and circulatory networks, further vivifying transnational ties.

By April 1944 the tide of war was shifting. Good news was coming from Europe for the Allies, and things were similarly on the upswing in CBI. Allied troops had made successful forays into Burma, the construction of the Ledo Road was proceeding apace, and Assam's railway system was increasing its capacity, strengthening Allied positions on the frontline. It was at that juncture that Japan invaded India. More than ever, the inhabitants of the Patkai found themselves "caught between two imperial propagandas". The Allies and the Japanese needed local manpower, knowledge and goodwill to get the advantage, and indeed to survive. Before attacking Imphal, Japanese forces occupied the Chin Hills across from Manipur, setting their headquarters at Tiddim. INA divisions accompanied them, ready to liberate India by force should the Japanese be successful. Decided attempts to win over local inhabitants had preceded the move. Leaflets dropped from the air and conversations with Chin traders who occasionally visited Japanese-occupied areas had spread the message that Japan was not the enemy but a liberator. Chin soldiers captured during the fall of Burma had been released to emphasize this and, once ensconced in Tiddim, the Japanese formed a Chin Defence Army and worked to rally locals to their cause.⁸³

Some Chin chiefs were receptive to that propaganda—perhaps, as with many Naga villagers, because they were sensitive to the Japanese's physical similarities with themselves, unlike British or Punjabi soldiers.⁸⁴ In the Kukis' case however, support for Japan had a clear political motivation. This global war was not of their own making, yet it offered a chance to fulfil long-standing dreams of freedom from the Raj through a pragmatic alliance with the Japanese.⁸⁵ The Japanese and the INA did not encounter similar degrees of support among the Mizos, Nagas, or Kachins however. Although Phizo's case stands out as an important example of Naga-INA-

⁸⁰ Pachuau, *Being Mizo*, pp. 104-05.

⁸¹ Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten wars: The end of Britain's Asian empire* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), p. 323.

⁸² Eaton, 'Conversion to Christianity among the Nagas', (pp. 42-44); Franke, *The Indian state and the Nagas*, pp. 58-59.

⁸³ Pau, 'The politics of Zo participation', (p. 679).

⁸⁴ Makiko Kimura, 'Memories of Japanese soldiers: Narratives on World War II in Naga villages' (paper presented at the 3rd Asian Borderlands Research Network Conference, Singapore, 2012).

⁸⁵ Guite, 'Representing local participation in INA-Japanese Imphal campaign'.

Japan cooperation, many Nagas misinformed the Japanese, informed the Allies and continued to join Naga Levies, Armed Nagas, and Naga Pioneers groups.⁸⁶ Meanwhile, beneath their apparent cooperation with the Japanese, many Chins were sending intelligence to the Allies, and some educated leaders formed clandestine organisations to repel the latter eventually.⁸⁷ Their actions contributed to Allied success at Kohima and Imphal; moreover, local support helped the Allies in “clearing up the [invasion’s] after-effects”. When the Japanese began their retreat in mid-1944, more Naga labour corps were raised. Others enlisted in “Lydall’s Lightfoot”, a para-military unit tasked with capturing stranded enemy soldiers.⁸⁸ To the south, the Japanese found themselves sandwiched between the Lushai Brigade and Chin guerrillas like the Sukte Independence Army and the Free Chin.⁸⁹

A variety of factors, often locally contingent, likely played a part in the support that the Mizos, Nagas, or Kachins extended to the Allies.⁹⁰ For some historians, the frequent failure of Japanese propaganda in the Burma Patkai was due to the fear that, should Japan take over, tribals would suffer more than under the British: Japan was allied to Burman nationalists who moved in the vanguard of Japanese forces and brutalised ethnic minorities. Good pre-war relations with the local colonial official or a V-Force leader were another ground for support in some cases, like in the Naga Hills, but not in others.⁹¹ The opportunities offered by a society in full upheaval might also have played a part. Yet, even in the Lushai Hills, where cooperation was overall forthcoming, there is evidence that people rather sought to navigate their way between the two camps, contributing to the Total Defence Scheme yet buying ostensibly Japanese goods at the bazaar, hoping this would spare them should the Japanese invade.⁹² What is fairly clear is that popular support was a matter of negotiation—fragile, conditional and not pre-given.

In the end, many of the Patkai’s inhabitants paid a high price for the war, and never more so than through the invasion. The battles of Imphal and Kohima turned Assam’s Naga Hills District and eastern Manipur into a “scene of desolation”.⁹³ After weeks of relentless fighting and bombing, Kohima was a battered shell. Imphal and Dimapur scarcely fared better. Moreover, devastation extended well beyond them: many villages were in ruins in the Naga Hills, while in parts of Manipur, every single building had reportedly been destroyed. Those still standing were often irreparably damaged, troops having removed their doors, window-frames, or thatch roofs to procure firewood and bamboo kindling. The end of the sieges brought its own lot of destruction, for “each village on the line of retreat was defended to the last cartridge” by Japanese forces.

The result was a second humanitarian catastrophe in the Patkai, this time for the inhabitants. Trapped in the fighting, many Nagas, Kukis, and Gurkhas left their homes, when they had not been killed. Some found refuge in their farmhouses, deep in the river valleys, others fled to the

⁸⁶ BL, IOR L/PJ/5/137. (April). See also Pachau and Van Schendel, *The camera as witness*, pp. 199-200; Sadan, *Being and becoming Kachin*. (Chapter 5). Unfortunately, it is difficult to obtain reliable and textured statistics of tribal participation in the war. As an example, Mandy Sadan provides a “workable upper figure” of 10-13,000 Kachins in Allied armies. Mandy Sadan, 'Ethnic armies and ethnic conflict in Burma: Reconsidering the history of colonial militarization in the Kachin region of Burma during the Second World War', *South East Asia Research*, 21:4 (2013), 601–626, (pp. 612-14).

⁸⁷ Pau, 'The politics of Zo participation', (pp. 11-13).

⁸⁸ London, BL, Indian Civil Service memoirs (Assam) (1977), Memoir - Edward Francis Lydall, MSS Eur F180/4.

⁸⁹ Pau, 'The politics of Zo participation', (p. 13).

⁹⁰ Sadan, 'Ethnic armies and ethnic conflict in Burma', (pp. 615-23).

⁹¹ Pau, 'The politics of Zo participation', (pp. 16-17).

⁹² BL, MSS Eur D1071, p.16.

⁹³ BL, IOR L/PJ/5/137. (June).

plains. They were joined by Chin and Kachin refugees from the Burma highlands.⁹⁴ The Meiteis sought Imphal's relative safety or fled to the floating islands on Manipur's Loktak Lake, where they survived on fish and seaweed.⁹⁵ In occupied areas food supplies stood dangerously low. The Japanese had requisitioned rice, cattle, pigs or fowls and seized cooking pots, knives, agricultural implements, and any other tools that might serve as weapons. But the worst had happened before their arrival: to prepare the defence of Imphal, Anglo-American troops had followed a scorched earth policy and forcibly evacuated civilians in less than forty-eight hours, without even the permission to use empty military trucks to take people's possessions into safety.⁹⁶

Figures 5-6. Kohima after the siege / Figure 6. Nagas returning to Kohima after the war
 Source: "Into Burma" (New Delhi: Inter Services Public Relations Directorate GHQ, n.d.).
 CSAS, Pawsey Papers, Box 3.

Reminiscent of the 1942 Burma refugee exodus, the only measures taken for civilians during the invasion were *ad hoc*—food and staff had been sent to a camp on the way to Kohima and Burma Refugee Organisation (BRO) camps in the foothills had hosted refugees and distributed clothing, blankets, medicines and food.⁹⁷ But the end of the sieges heightened the need for relief operations and later for reconstruction, and thereby created yet another momentum of state expansion into the Patkai. The Allies had caused much of the destruction and suffering, especially since, by most accounts, the Japanese had behaved well in Manipur and the Naga Hills. Indeed, locals favourably compared them to the behaviour of the "Punjabis".⁹⁸ Colonial authorities felt that, to ensure the popular support necessary for Burma's reconquest, they had to show concern for the horrors the war had visited on the Patkai.

The Assam Governor formed an Assam Relief Measures organisation for war-affected areas, irrespective of whether Allies or Japanese had caused the destruction. The priority was to prevent starvation and disease. According to one estimate, 15% of the fields around Imphal were uncultivated, a percentage that rose to fifty percent in Manipur's Ukhrul Subdivision, dominated by Thangkhul Nagas.⁹⁹ Epidemics loomed, moreover: 8,000 Nagas had taken refuge in malarial areas, the monsoon was at its height, and pigs—the Patkai's scavengers—had been slaughtered. Food and medicines were sent into the hills, the RAF airdropping them when necessary, and 16,000 tarpaulins and 2,000 army tents delivered for temporary shelter. As in 1942, relief administrators had to contend with the army: civilian requirements were subordinated to military ones. Trains brought in paltry loads for war sufferers, military transport into the hills was almost unavailable, and some BRO camps were requisitioned for army purposes. When food and stores for the Patkai's inhabitants arrived in the foothills, they were left lying around. Troops hastily constructed go-downs, but they were of such poor quality that the rice rotted. Other than tentage salvaged from military dumps, many civilians thus lacked edible food and shelter.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ IOR, Mss Eur E325/19. "Measures"; BL, IOR L/PJ/5/137. (August-September)

⁹⁵ IOR, Mss Eur E325/19. "Relief".

⁹⁶ Cambridge, CSAS, Gimson Papers (n.d.), Civilian relations with the Army, pp.2-3; New Delhi, NAI, External Affairs Proceedings (1945), Rehabilitation of the dispossessed population of Manipur and Naga Hills, Assam, 216-CA/45.

⁹⁷ IOR, Mss Eur E325/19. "Measures".

⁹⁸ BL, IOR L/PJ/5/137 (July). Perhaps partly because of increasingly lax standards of recruitment in colonial forces as the conflict tarried. Indivar Kamtekar, 'A different war dance: State and class in India 1939-1945', *Past and Present*, 176:1 (2002), 187-221, (pp. 191-93).

⁹⁹ Cambridge, CSAS, Gimson Papers (n.d.), Assam relief measures, p.1.

¹⁰⁰ IOR, Mss Eur E325/19. "Measures"

By February 1945, the worst had nevertheless been averted. After long discussions with frontier officials, Delhi issued orders for permanent rehabilitation in Manipur and Assam's Naga hills. War damage was to be repaired, houses rebuilt, livestock and household possessions replaced, and agricultural self-sufficiency restored. To ascertain a loss, local interpreters accompanied by specially recruited staff visited each affected village. Their lists were then cross-checked by frontier officials and relief organisers. Even before official orders were given, Assam Relief Measures staff began distributing seeds, agricultural implements and cattle. Each householder who had lost land or been looted was given seven sorts of vegetable and potato seeds. Manipur authorities used a mix of coercion and enticement to get traumatised Meitei farmers to resume cultivation, threatening to reduce rations if they did not go home while depositing house-building materials on village sites.¹⁰¹ Fortunately, late 1944 yielded a bumper crop in the Imphal Valley, easing the food supply situation.¹⁰²

In the Patkai however, it was not until spring 1945 that farmers were able to harvest their fields again. The administration kept feeding people, whether or not they had evacuated. Thousands of rations were issued at a camp just below Kohima, for which the householder was issued a certificate. Once the frontline receded, twelve food depots were opened along the Naga Hills District's newly built roads to serve groups of villages. A similar system was launched in Manipur. Rations do not seem to have been generous, and initial difficulties in opening depots in several unconnected areas forced villagers to walk for three to four days to obtain food, so that they ate up a lot of their rations before even reaching home. Where cultivation took time to recover, villagers were fed until late 1945. Funds were simultaneously handed out to villages to disinfect their springs, and itinerant doctors hiked around the hills to inoculate against cholera and typhoid. People who had lost clothing or cooking utensils were supplied with a couple of pots and blankets, and boiling pans were handed out to enable Nagas to resume salt production from local brine springs. Pigs were imported and axes, hoes, ploughshares and *daos* distributed. Cash and materials were distributed to help the construction of houses and furniture and, until traders could return, a lorry acted as a mobile canteen, visiting roadside villages every week to deliver the "hundred and one things" that people had come to appreciate during the war.¹⁰³

None of these measures were recognised as a legal liability by the colonial state. Provincial officials' talk of "compensation" had quickly been quashed by Delhi. Except for property requisitioned by the army, "those who had suffered"—they were not called victims—would only be granted relief, "similar to those [measures] taken after [...] an earthquake or a flood."¹⁰⁴ Cash was handed out only when assistance in kind was impossible, and the scale of all relief limited to "the minimum adequate for the resumption of normal life".¹⁰⁵ Nor would Delhi consent to shoulder rehabilitation: Assam was to call upon it only to procure materials unavailable locally. Provincial officials counter-argued that this was insufficient, and that generosity would not be out of place towards "the people who helped us". In some cases, they succeeded—most importantly perhaps in ensuring that, since it was seldom clear whether Allies or Japanese had caused the damage, there would be a unique set of measures.¹⁰⁶ It would

¹⁰¹ Ibid. "Relief".

¹⁰² BL, IOR L/PJ/5/137. (September).

¹⁰³ IOR, Mss Eur E325/19. "Relief".

¹⁰⁴ NAI, External 216-CA/45. (Commonwealth Relations Secretary to Assam Secretary, 28 August 1944).

¹⁰⁵ 'A report on the measures of rehabilitation and reconstruction undertaken by the Government of India in the Naga Hills and Manipur State in 1944-45, in order to repair the ravages caused by the Japanese invasion of 1944' (Delhi: s.n., 1949). "Compensation agreed".

¹⁰⁶ NAI, External 216-CA/45.

take much longer for the Indian state to acknowledge its moral responsibility towards the people of the Patkai.¹⁰⁷

Figure 7. Kohima being rebuilt

Source: CSAS, Pawsey Papers, Box A102, Album 18.

Lingering tastes

On the face of it, the Second World War had left British Indian authorities in a position of control never before experienced by their predecessors in the Patkai. At the same time, the final months of the war and its immediate aftermath fostered conditions in which the region's transnational connections further intensified, and indeed acquired new shapes. Few of them lent themselves to the easy re-assertion of a reified Indian geo-body that pre-war colonial rule had shaped—and yet, decolonisation along these official territorial lines was fast becoming a distinct perspective.

War was not yet over in late 1944. As the frontline receded from Assam and Manipur, the Patkai became the springboard for Southeast Asia's reconquest. Meanwhile, China still needed a land link to India. Allied troops continued to pour into Upper Assam, already close to saturation.¹⁰⁸ The Ledo Road's construction, which had continued even during the invasion, had reached the staggering cost (for the time) of \$148 million. But the Burma section was still incomplete and existing portions needed protection from the jungle and the rains. On 4 February 1945, the first convoy finally left Ledo. For the next seven months, thousands of vehicles plied the road to Yunnan.¹⁰⁹ It was only in September 1945, after Japan's surrender, that Chinese and American troops began to leave Assam in earnest, along with many Chinese civilians.

The departure of troops and workers brought its own lot of changes to north-eastern India. Now seemingly in a hurry to leave, Chinese and American troops were disposing of their equipment and supplies as fast as possible. Though many of these stocks interested civilian authorities, they struggled to retrieve large quantities of material from their allies. More cash-strapped than ever, the Assam administration could not afford a large-scale buy-back without central assistance; and Delhi, for reasons that are not entirely clear, proved remarkably apathetic on this issue. US troops started selling their stocks privately (and surreptitiously), when they did not just jettison them all around the place.¹¹⁰

The situation led to weakly regulated markets, to the benefit of many. If they knew where to ask, private individuals and firms could obtain the right to collect scrap over a given area for a relatively small sum. A few managed to obtain ownership certificates for military pipelines, whose pipes they began to sell. Some Meiteis took to forging brass pots and ornaments out of cartridges cases, others to fishing by explosives or salvaging immobilised military vehicles. Damaged or broken down trucks, weapon-carriers, and jeeps were plenty for the taking: many had been abandoned after suffering enemy damage or breaking down in places too remote to deliver spare parts or enable repair. Despite their lack of formal training in automobile engineering, many locals became specialists at turning rusty military vehicles into serviceable

¹⁰⁷ New Delhi, National Archives of India, Government of India. Proceedings of the Ministry of External Affairs (1951), Communal incidents in Assam, 3(24)-BL.

¹⁰⁸ BL, IOR L/PJ/5/137. (May).

¹⁰⁹ 'Report of the chief of transportation, Army service forces, World War II.' (Washington, DC: US War Department, 1945) (p.85).

¹¹⁰ BL, IOR L/P&J/5/138. (June-September).

engines.¹¹¹ As for the Ledo Road, it became not a geo-strategic artery—it was too late in the war for that—but an economic one, enabling greater movement of goods between China, Burma, Tibet and eastern India than ever, untaxed. Assam authorities even suspected Chinese troops of importing illegal consumer goods from Yunnan, Sichuan and Burma at the cost of the US army and without declaring it. The road, yesterday the pride of Allied wartime achievements, had morphed an engine of systematic and large-scale smuggling.¹¹²

What most concerned late colonial authorities was that guns and ammunition were proliferating. Prior to 1942, colonial authorities had devoted much effort to disarming the people of the Patkai. The war had turned the policy on its head: to help in the fight against Japan, tribals had been re-armed, and with more modern weapons. This was without counting the disturbingly high number of arms reported lost during the fighting—in fact, Assam authorities suspected some Allied troops of purposely losing their arms. Now that the conflict was over, departing soldiers were moreover leaving behind quantities of unused ammunition and weapons. Many were likely broken or obsolete, but enough remained serviceable, once salvaged. The wartime expansion of trade routes facilitated the circulation of arms and ammunition from the Patkai to the eastern Himalayas and the Southeast Asia Massif. Khampa and Han merchants from Atzuntze in Yunnan had begun trading with Sadiya in Upper Assam, explaining the abundance of ammunition in the Lohit Valley, just north of the Patkai.¹¹³ “[G]un barrels, if not complete guns, certainly reach the Mishmi from Tibet”, noted a frontier official; “judging from the lavish expenditure on ammunition on even the smallest birds there must be an ample supply.”¹¹⁴ In Burma, the Shan states, Bhamo, and Myitkyina were also witnessing proliferation.¹¹⁵ Anxieties regarding heavily armed post-war populations were highest regarding the Naga-inhabited parts of the Patkai, where inter-village raids were, or had been, a common practice. Long worried about the spread of modern warfare technologies among the Nagas, frontier officers feared that, thanks to their own wartime strategy of arming them, a “widespread massacre” was in the offing.¹¹⁶ Some officers disagreed with the project of disarming people however, arguing they needed the guns for peaceful purposes, like saving their crops from wildlife’s depredations.¹¹⁷

From 1945 onwards, “surrender” campaigns were organised in Burmese and Indian frontier districts. Quantities of weapons were recovered from the Nagas as the frontline receded. Authorities in Manipur were slower to act but succeeded in retrieving more arms around 1949.¹¹⁸ Overall, these campaigns seem to have been peaceful, perhaps because, more often than not, the “surrender” of weapons involved buying them from the villagers. Notwithstanding the limited capabilities of civilian authorities to retrieve weapons by force, they could with difficulty explain why, having re-armed tribal populations they had for decades sought to disarm, they were suddenly changing their mind. Individuals in possession of firearms and ammunition were not forced to hand them out but paid to do so—quite handsomely. No overall figures are forthcoming for Assam, but nearly a million rupees were spent on recovering arms

¹¹¹ BL, Mss Eur C400, pp.185-87.

¹¹² BL, IOR L/P&J/5/138. (June).

¹¹³ Itanagar, APSA, (1945), Tibet intelligence reports, Misc-35/45; NAI, External 162-CA/46.

¹¹⁴ London, BL, IOR (1947), Tour notes of the Adviser to the Governor of Assam, 1944-1946 IOR/L/PS/12/3120, p.6 (Tour notes for the Lohit Valley, 1946).

¹¹⁵ London, BL, IOR (1947), Kachin Hill Tracts general file, IOR/M/4/2852, ff2-4.

¹¹⁶ London, BL, IOR (1937-1947), Burma-Assam border, IOR/L/PS/12/3116, ff5-21.

¹¹⁷ London, British Library, Anthony G. McCall Papers (1945), Note on guns issued for defence, after close of hostilities, 2 January 1945, MSS Eur E361/64.

¹¹⁸ Guwahati, ASA, TAD Records (1955), Recovery of arms and ammunition in the Naga Hills District, TAD/CON/13/1955.

around Myitkyina, in northern Burma.¹¹⁹ Even some “head-hunting” villages were paid to release their weapons.¹²⁰ Frontier authorities initially felt satisfied that surrender campaigns had worked. Yet, ten years after the war, Assam authorities had to admit that attempts to curb gun proliferation had failed. Reports from the Manipur and Naga Hills showed that quantities of weapons were still in possession of the inhabitants, and more yet lay abandoned in half-forgotten military dumps somewhere in the Patkai jungle.¹²¹

Colonial sources of the period are full of comments about “smuggling”, “black markets”, “pilfering”, “banditry”, and “ill-gotten gains”. The end of the war appears as a period of crime and lawlessness, during which the residence of the Manipur Political Agent could be broken into and government cars cannibalised for their electrical apparatus. The dangerous presence of unexploded bombs, discarded military property, and army dumps that had not been blown up added to the characterisation.¹²² The very language used in these reports tried to cloak a murky situation involving a variety of state- and non-state actors, and where the distinction between the two (or between the licit and the illicit, the stateless and the ruled, regulated and deregulated markets), far from a black-and-white dichotomy, was often unclear. It also glossed over the fact that the Meiteis or the Nagas were likely seeking goods and lifestyles they had got accustomed to during the war.¹²³ Above all, official qualms betrayed late colonial hesitations in the face of the socio-economic reconfigurations engendered by the war, reconfigurations that vivified the Patkai’s integration into trans-regional and world markets that largely escaped their control, and in which local people could, and indeed would, engage. And this was occurring just as the transfer of power was emerging on top of India and Burma’s agenda.

Indeed, a strong political dimension underlay the unsettled atmosphere of the conflict’s immediate aftermath. The first signs of political mobilisation in the Patkai dated back to the First World War and locals’ conscription into auxiliary forces.¹²⁴ War veterans had brought back novel experiences, tastes, and aspirations, catalysing political awareness and mobilisation among them and the educated minority.¹²⁵ A Naga Club had been founded in 1918. As was the case with socio-cultural change, the Second World War amplified this mobilisation. The Kukis had fought with the INA for their own purposes. Songs about the war (*Japan Gal La*) expressed their continued wish for self-rule, separate from India.¹²⁶ Though more on the Allies side, Lushai Hills inhabitants held not too dissimilar aspirations: the Mizo and Paite chiefs had answered McCall’s call on the premise they would thereby gain self-determination. An implicit condition to their support was that “the destiny of Lushais passes to no other hands without the consent of the Lushai peoples” after the war.¹²⁷ Many frontier officials agreed with this, especially if they supported the Crown Colony Scheme. McCall had sought to foster a pan-Mizo identity the Lushai Hills in the 1930s, transcending the divide “between Christians and

¹¹⁹ BL, IOR M/4/2852. (Report for Myitkyina district, November 1947)

¹²⁰ London, BL, IOR (1946-47), Disturbances on the Indo-Burma frontier, IOR/M/4/2845. (SecGov Assam to Foreign, 23 January).

¹²¹ ASA, TAD/CON/13/1955; Guwahati, ASA, Home Department - Miscellaneous Branch Files (1954), Surrender of unauthorised arms and ammunitions, HML/38/54.

¹²² BL, Mss Eur C400, p.186; New Delhi, NAI, External Affairs Proceedings (1947), Reported burglary by Burmese dacoits in Manipur State, 41-NEF/47; NAI, External 13(11)-P/46.

¹²³ IOR, Mss Eur E325/19. “Relief”.

¹²⁴ Robert Reid, *History of the frontier areas bordering on Assam, 1883-1941* (Delhi: Eastern Publishing, 1983), pp. 162-63.

¹²⁵ Pachuau and Van Schendel, *The camera as witness*, pp. 189-98.

¹²⁶ Guite, 'Representing local participation in INA–Japanese Imphal campaign', (pp. 299-302).

¹²⁷ Pachuau and Van Schendel, *The camera as witness*, pp. 200-201.

non-Christians”¹²⁸. By mobilising every single village in the District in the name of “our land”, to be defended by all and at all cost against an alien enemy, the Total Defence Scheme furthered these aims. In 1946, the founding of the Mizo Union marked the birth of organised politics among the Mizos. And yet, here too nation-building could actually entail a breach or distance with India, rather than union with it. Many Lushais felt different from the Indians, and the chiefs—if not the commoners—had no appetite for an independent India where they would likely lose their social and political position.¹²⁹

As already seen, a similar consolidation of pan-Naga identity took place due to the war, reaching the masses beyond the elites. Also in 1945-46, a Naga National Council was created to represent the various Naga tribes on a proportional basis. In an echo of Mizo concerns, its goal was to ensure the representation of the Nagas and their wish for self-determination in the context of decolonisation, now on the agenda in India and Burma alike.¹³⁰ Political activism was fuelled by rumours about the defunct Crown Colony Scheme and the support of many frontier officials, who saw themselves as the appointed guardians of highland tribes.¹³¹ For some Nagas, including Phizo, independence from Britain *and* from India was the only acceptable option, and they would fight for that aim for decades to come. Between revived transregional ties, heightened ethnicisation and rapid politicisation along fault lines alien to the Congress-League tussle, the war had ensured that decolonisation would not be a simple affair in the Patkai.

Figure 8. Nagas shifting a 2nd Division memorial stone
Source: CSAS, Pawsey Papers, Box A102, Album 18.

Conclusion

After a long period of disinterest, historians have in recent years started to move beyond partition and independence-centric studies to give the Second World War pride of place in accounts of the transition to post-colonial South Asia.¹³² The importance of the conflict was perhaps nowhere greater than in north-eastern India. By 1945, the face of the Patkai had durably changed. The Second World War had been a concentrated period of change at all levels—social, cultural, military, political, administrative, religious, economic. The landscape had been mapped more finely than ever before, and then remodelled for military purposes. Forests had been cut down to make way for airfields, arsenals and hospitals. Hamlets had turned

¹²⁸ CSAS, McCall Papers, p.19 (Account of the Total Defence Scheme).

¹²⁹ Pachau and Van Schendel, *The camera as witness*, pp. 200-02.

¹³⁰ New Delhi, NAI, Political Department Proceedings (1945), Petition from the Nagas and Kukis of Manipur State for constitutional changes, 3(7)-P/45; Franke, *The Indian state and the Nagas*. (Chapter 4).

¹³¹ David R. Syiemlieh, 'Response of the North-Eastern hill tribes of India towards partition and independence', *Indo-British Review: A Journal of History*, 17:1-2 (1989), 27-35.

¹³² Two monographs on the war were published in 2015-16: Khan, *The Raj at war*; Srinath Raghavan, *India's war: The making of Modern South Asia, 1939-45* (London: Allen Lane, 2016). For earlier contributions see also Sanjoy Bhattacharya, *Propaganda and information in Eastern India, 1939-45: A necessary weapon of war* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2001); Kamtekar, 'The shiver of 1942'; Kamtekar, 'A different war dance'; T.T. Young, 'Mobilisation, militarisation and "mal-contentment": Punjab and the Second World War', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 25:2 (2002), 137-151; Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten armies*; Tarak Barkawi, 'Culture and combat in the colonies: The Indian Army in the Second World War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41:2 (2006), 325-355; Kaushik Roy, 'Discipline and morale of the African, British and Indian Army units in Burma and India during World War Two: July 1943 to August 1945', *Modern Asian Studies* (2010), 1-28.

into villages, villages into towns. Strangers from all around the globe had arrived in the hills, some never to go back. Wage labour and the cash economy had made deeper inroads, boosted by an unprecedented influx of goods, insatiable needs for manpower and food, and the appearance of a number of specialised jobs. Demands for education and political empowerment had spread and intensified. “I don’t believe that, having heard the legions thunder past, the people will go back unchanged to their old ways of thinking and living”, reflected the Assam Governor.¹³³

This article has notably insisted on how the Second World War led the Indian state to “climb the hills”,¹³⁴ after acting at a distance or by proxy. Its physical presence could henceforth be seen in countless ways: the hair-spinning, but metaled roads; the transit camps; the new or expanded administrative outposts; the relief and rehabilitation staff rushing through the countryside. Now reluctant to play “second fiddle” to the missionaries, frontier officials sought to build their own schools and dispensaries in the name of post-war “reconstruction”.¹³⁵ This outlook also betrayed a pan-Indian and trans-national turn towards “development”, partly brought on in colonial administrative circles by the war itself.¹³⁶

But if the Second World War had been a state-building agent, it had also been a de- or trans-nationalising one. India and Burma’s frontier administrations had become welded together even as state penetration in the Patkai dramatically extended. In the wartime Arakan Hill Tracts or northwestern Burma’s Naga and Kachin areas, “government” really meant Assam. As importantly, the conflict revived the ties with Tibet, with Burma, with China that had historically marked the Patkai’s societies, while it intensified the interaction between the region and the world at large. Assam as a whole was then englobed in the notion of “Southeast Asia” coalescing as a result of the war.¹³⁷ “[T]he frontier of India is today gone to pieces”, wrote a war correspondent in January 1946. “No matter if some of these roads built with the human labour that India supplied were closed, Assam is in a position to look beyond the boundaries of India to Burma and Greater Indies.”¹³⁸

Looking at the Second World War in north-eastern India in terms of push-and-pull effects offers several further insights. Firstly, thinking of war in terms of transnational history helps us probe further the disjunctions between state-making and nation-building. At another level, the case of the Patkai hints that the narrative of the Second World War in southern Asia looks very different on land than on sea. Whereas the conflict led to the interruption of ocean-borne links between India and south-eastern Asia, as scholars of the Indian Ocean point out, the reverse was true on dry ground, where Assam and the Patkai rediscovered their transnational context.¹³⁹

¹³³ BL, IOR L/P&J/5/138. (late June).

¹³⁴ Willem van Schendel, *A history of Bangladesh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 25.

¹³⁵ Pachuau and Van Schendel, *The camera as witness*, p. 119.

¹³⁶ Sanjoy Bhattacharya and Benjamin Zachariah, “A great destiny”: The British colonial state and the advertisement of post-war reconstruction in India, 1942-45’, *South Asia Research* 19:1 (1999), 71-100; Benjamin Zachariah, *Developing India: An intellectual and social history, c.1930-50* (New Delhi; Oxford: OUP, 2005); Andres Rodriguez, ‘Building the nation, serving the frontier: Mobilizing and reconstructing China’s borderlands during the War of Resistance (1937–1945)’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 45:2 (2011), 345-376.

¹³⁷ Paul H. Kratoska, R. Raben and Henk Schulte Nordholt, *Locating Southeast Asia: Geographies of knowledge and politics of space* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2005), p. 2.

¹³⁸ ‘Assam through journalists’ eye’, *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, 15 January 1946.

¹³⁹ Sunil S. Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The furies of nature and the fortunes of migrants* (Harvard: HUP, 2013). (Chapter 6); Khan, *The Raj at war*, p. 93.

The war's third and final insight revolves around the Patkai highlands' recent history as part of independent India and Burma—a trajectory that included various self-determination movements among the Kachins, Nagas or Mizos, often in the shape of violent struggles against the Raj's successor states.¹⁴⁰ Long-standing debates about the origins of these movements have focused on colonial rule in general and on the transfer of power in 1947-48. What becomes apparent, from this article, is that decolonisation's characterisation as a victorious freedom struggle was problematic in the Patkai also due to its juxtaposition with the Second World War. A mere couple of years after a global conflict had opened up (or re-opened) the Patkai to a world of which India and Burma were but a part, the two countries acquired independence—trapping local people within supposedly “national” borders. A sign of this shift had occurred in October 1945 with the reversal of Assam and Manipur to India's Old Standard Time, less suited to their easterly geographic locations. The decision would come to haunt Delhi's relations with northeastern India.¹⁴¹ The independence of India, Pakistan and Burma as separate and bounded entities hence appears jarring in light of the war that had immediately preceded them. Like the rest of Zomia, the Patkai was “sliced into pieces” between different countries at the very moment it had become more integrated with its transnational surroundings.¹⁴² This brutal severance was only one of the legacies left by the Second World War in the India-Burma borderlands. In Burma, the conflict led to “the institutionalisation of highly centrifugal, decentralized forms of control over violence”, which would destabilise the post-colonial state; similar trends could be discerned on the Indian side of the border.¹⁴³ Aspirations for self-rule had not only grown during the war, but the service rendered had left many in the Patkai counting on the transfer of power to renegotiate territorial imaginations. Late colonial discussions around the creation of the Crown Colony did not outlast the war, but they reinforced these expectations. Moreover, the capacity of the Mizos or the Nagas to stand up to the Indian military was boosted by the ready availability of Second World War weapons left behind in the region. Beneath the fissures created by the juxtaposition of independence and the Second World War lay the making of “durable disorder” in India's northeast.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ These movements led to the creation of the Indian states of Nagaland and Mizoram, in 1963 and 1987.

¹⁴¹ Julien Bouissou, 'Indian state wants a new time zone', *The Guardian*, 28 January 2014.

¹⁴² van Schendel, 'Geographies of knowing', (p. 652).

¹⁴³ Mary P. Callahan, *Making enemies: War and state building in Burma* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003). (Chapter 3).

¹⁴⁴ Sanjib Baruah, *Durable disorder: Understanding the politics of Northeast India* (Oxford: OUP, 2007).